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ABSTRACT

There should be no barriers to school library use for handicapped children, since their limitations may make the library a window on the world which they would not otherwise have. Sometimes these children who most need help may not be tolerated in a library because of their behavior, or the library may not provide appropriate materials. There are ways in which librarians may learn to handle aggressive and withdrawn children, as well as those who are not self-directed. The librarian must also have information easily available in a form which is usable to handicapped children, and must avoid creating architectural barriers for children in wheelchairs and on crutches. The library should also provide a variety of environments, so that a child may find a space in which he is comfortable. (LS)

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THE EXCEPTIONAL CHILD IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY:

IDENTIFICATION AND ACCOMMODATION

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Jared Bean in his Old Librarian's Almanac gives the following advice to his fellow professionals:

> So far as your authority will permit it, exercise great Discrimination as to which Persons shall be admitted to the use of the Library. For the Treasure House of Literature is no more to be thrown open to the ravages of the unreasoning Mob, than is a Fair Garden to be laid unprotected at the Mercy of a Swarm of Beasts.
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> Question each Applicant closely. See that he be a Person of Good Reputation, scholarly Habits, sober and courteous Demeanor. Any mere Trifler, a Person that would Dally with Books, or seek in them shallow amusement, may be Dismissed without delay.

Although few would subscribe any longer to this elitist view of the library, there are still many school libraries in which the high-achieving, self-directed, serious student is enthusiastically welcomed while his less luminous peers are merely tolerated - and often there is no room at all for those who are not ambulatory, literate, well-behaved and free of sensory or psychological impairment. But a library in a democratic society cannot afford to function as an exclusionary agent. Exclusion further exacerbates the consequences of ghettoization many handicapped persons have already experienced. In a real and also in a symbolic sense, the library provides passage to what the world is all about. Within its physical confines one can begin to find out about the unreachable world and about one's own unfathomable self. Equal access to the cultural riches in the "Treasure House of Literature" must be provided for all our students.

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1. The Old Librarian's Almanac, quoted in Margaret A. Edwards, The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1969), p. 107.

However, an examination of the past reveals that many children with special needs have been denied entry to the mainstream of American life. An unreadiness to consider them as worthy as their peers as well as inadequate levels of financial support have restricted their schooling and unfairly isolated these children from what many consider the minimal rights and perquisites of any child. Educators, responding to increased political pressure, directive court decisions, higher levels of awareness and sensitivity and the demands of conscience, are accepting the challenge to provide an education for all children.

The library has a critical role in this great democratizing event. A child with serious physiological limitations must of necessity be excluded from many of the experiences his peers take for granted. Exclusion from the library would further reduce the child's access to cultural experiences. It should be remembered that vicarious participation in some facets of life may be his only real option. To seal off the world of books is to intensify his restrictions.

The development of a democratic library in which all children are welcome requires a different perception of the library's usual mode of functioning. It cannot merely offer a multitude of materials and expect each child to adjust his learning style to what has been provided. Instead, the librarian must assess any limitations and disabilities of the potential user population and find ways to make information and literary experiences attainable despite apparent obstacles. The library, as a microcosm of a democratic society, must embrace with enthusiasm and value equally the many kinds of students who enter therein.

The librarian needs to take this iniative not only for the benefit of the exceptional child, but for the normal child as well who will be helped

to understand and accept diversity and variation in human behavior. In addition, this will increase his humanity and sensitize him to his social responsibility toward his peers.

Who is the exceptional child? This child is one whose disability is of such an order or dimension that, without beneficent intervention or adaptation, the child will not flourish in most social, recreational or academic settings and will function significantly below reasonable expectations. These children may, in some cases, have learning disabilities, be disruptive, have distortions in vision or hearing, be experientially deficient as a result of mobility restrictions, or be working at academically lower levels than their age peers. Note that the emphasis here is not on the label - a cripple, a retardate - but on the dysfunction itself. What needs to be stressed is that these are students and they, like all others, have need of a full and enriching school experience. Therefore, it is the library's responsibility to accommodate the childs' problem and ease the consequences of his handicap.

In some libraries, the exceptional child has been refused admittance, banished to the principal's office or sent back to his own room. In others, there are few books or materials which correspond with the interests or abilities of low functioning readers. When this occurs, the library acts as a custodial rather than an instructional facet of the school in relation to those children who can't meet the demands of the collection. The librarian or media specialist, caught in the press of other demands, sometimes has put a low priority on programming for these children. Circumstances of birth or accident have resulted in handicapping condition; the academic community must make sure that through neglect and exclusion from the worlds' literary heritage, the child is not further penalized.

The librarian may be startled to discover that in some psychiatric or correctional settings, the library is considered the place of choice for therapeutic modification.[2,3] The librarian should be alert to the strong possibility that the library symbolically represents the site of past failures and that at the outset the child may display indifference, hostility or rejection. That is, the child's resistance may be based on failure in reading resulting in avoidance behavior toward books. The library as a repository of thousands of books may be perceived as the ultimate symbol of his inadequacy. Fader reports on a boy

> so traumitized in his California public schools that he had to be put into a very special reading class staffed by psychologists from the University of California in Los Angeles. Summoned by a teacher from his seat in a rear row, he began to walk directly toward the front of the room; suddenly he stopped, backed up a few steps, turned about and walked about the periphery of the room to reach his teacher. What had stopped him? An open book lying on a desk halfway toward the front of the room. Who knows what horrors it symbolized for him after ten years of scarifying failure in the public schools.[4]

While this admittedly is an extreme case, yet hostility and fear of books are widespread among children who have been academic failures.

Every person wants attention. If the child cannot get it in a constructive fashion, he will achieve this goal in other ways which are often ingeneously devised for maximum negative impact. When the librarian plans well, ignores tentative negative behavior, minimizes interfering stimuli, praises consistently but not excessively when good behavior is displayed, the liklihood of the library experience being mutually satisfying is enhanced.

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2. Daniel N. Fader, Hooked on Books: Program and Proof (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1966).

3. Fritz Redl and Edith M. Maeda, "The Furious Children and the Library," Top of the News, XVII (October, 1960, pp 48-63.

4. Fader, Op. cit., p. 3

What kinds of undesirable behaviors might be anticipated in the library? These generally will fall into three basic categories: overt-active, delay and withdrawal-passive. The more obvious and often most threatening to the librarian is the overt behavior because of its potential for disturbance and contagion. The librarian will need to plan for rapid and firm intervention to contain the spread of unacceptable behavior. The librarian can manipulate the psychological climate among the other users so that clowning, interruptions, etc., are neither much noted nor valued. She can do this in many ways:

(a) by explaining the rules of the library clearly, specifically and completely - including the consequences for violating those rules;

(b) by pairing the child with undesirable behavior with an admired, well-behaved class leader;

(c) by developing a relationship with the child in which rational appeals will work; and

(d) by making the program so intrinsically rewarding and pleasurable that inclusion in the library becomes its own reward.

The librarian may discover that vandalism of library contents may occur. In some instances, this is vindictive behavior. However in many others, such destruction is a gauge of the child's feeling of idleness, boredom or discomfort.

To avoid confronting the possibility of attending to a library role and failing, many children have devised a repetoire of tactics which sidestep the task and thus avoid the prospect of self, peer, or teacher evaluation. Excessive requests to carry messages, help the teacher, leave the room, straighten the shelves, sharpen pencils, etc., involve the teachers' collusion if they are to succeed. In other cases, the child has mastered the illusion of seeming busy, examining book spines, holding books or leafing through current periodicals. Careful observation will reveal that although these

children are physically in the library, they are not interacting with it in any significant way.

The librarian has many techniques at hand to respond to delay tactics. She may open the class with a highly structured (e.g. storytelling) rather than a non-directive activity (e.g. choosing books for recreational reading), quickly follow this up with a specific assignment for the delay prone child and guide him to the next task. The librarian may expedite his involvement in the class by giving him an assigned seat and having a high interest/low vocabulary or large-print book already waiting for him and a statement designed to plunge him quickly into the task: "There's a picture of a dog in here that looks like the one you told me you had. Let me show you. Oh, this isn't the same kind? Really? Well, how is it different? etc." She may have a self monitoring daily library schedule which he checks off and turns in at the end of the period. This can be designed for appropriate time allotments and sequential tasks which will guarantee success. Until the exceptional child sees the value and can take the iniative in self-direction, the librarian must have prepared a special daily plan for the child.

The easiest to overlook, but perhaps the most imperative to remediate, are the array of withdrawal or passivity-related behaviors which the child may employ. The child may not participate in serious book search activities for a number of reasons. He may be embarrased at his low reading level and may attempt to avoid revealing this to his age peers. He may be ashamed to request direct help from either another child or the librarian or may lack such basic knowledge as card catalog usage. He may not know how to judge the difficulty level of a book. In a word he is always "looking", but he rarely locates a book which satisfies him.

Just as the child tries to camouflage his inadequacy in book or material search, so he also needs to devise some tactical protective responses related to oral questioning. Many children have been scorched by a sarcastic remark about their inadequacies and have learned to shield themselves by embracing passivity or invisibility. Other children have made an adjustment to their own problems by reducing their involvement. Some have learned to delay confronting a situation where they might be asked to read orally, by asking innumerable questions.

If print size is too small, if the card catalog is inaccessible, if no variation in time allowed is made for children who need longer circulation time due to slower reading rate or physical problems, if the child cannot hear the discussion during oral activities, or other evidence exists which indicates his needs have not been considered, he will protect himself by withdrawing from the predicament and thus minimize physical and psychological stress.

The right to read must not be allowed to become merely an empty cliche. It must become a reality for every child. For this to happen, the library must be devoid of architectural barriers. What are the components of the physical setting which limit access to physically handicapped students? They include doorways too narrow to accommodate wheelchairs or children on crutches; aisles and passageways not wide enough for the turning radius of a wheelchair; sills too high to roll over; location on the upper floors or split levels within the library; tables and carrels with skirts that prevent a wheelchair from coming close enough for the occupant to use them; materials stored too high or too low for a child in a chair or one balancing on crutches to reach; or turnstiles of any type. All these preclude usage by the disabled.

For the severely visually impaired, the entrance should be marked by brailled or raised letter identification. Furnishings should be permanent so

that a constant relearning of the floor plan is unnecessary. Obstructions should be padded so that misjudgements are not paid for with broken bones and bruises. Frequently used materials, and all audio software should be identified in braille as well as standard type. Storage space for braille-writers, prisms and magnifiers should be provided within the library. For the more moderately visually handicapped, large print books need to be provided and careful attention must be paid to lighting. The intensity of light available should vary according to the task and the childs' needs. Writing and working surfaces should minimize reflective glare.

The accoustical treatment of a room is a critical factor in the success a deaf child has in school. Whatever residual hearing he may have can be magnified by mechanical means. Even so, he may still only be able to distinguish certain sounds so that auditory input provides him with few clues as to what is happening. He must use visual stimuli to fill in the picture. Background music, much in vogue in some libraries, diminishes the deaf childs' ability to function.

Hearing impaired children may be dependent on lipreading, signing and other visual cues. The child should not be placed so that his line of sight is blocked to the speaker. When a discussion is taking place, the hearing impaired child may not know who the person speaking at any particular moment is and so where he should look for cues. Knowing this, the librarian can so position the child relative to the group that he can see everyone's face and she should indicate by hand signals who the next speaker will be.

The librarian needs to be cognizant of the fact that the deaf child may not hear bells signalling a fire drill or change in class periods. Auditory signals must be supplemented by flashing lights or other visual signals or the library staff must assume responsibility for individually notifying hearing impaired children.

The disturbed child also needs environmental adaptations. Research has shown that he tends to require more physical space than his peers so the same square footage can accommodate fewer students. Crowding leads to a build-up of tensions and consequently a reduced ability to function. Many children with adjustment problems have difficulty coping with excessive stimuli. High sided carrels tend to control the quantity and variety of stimuli bombarding the child at any one time and so reduce distractability enabling them to focus their attention on the task at hand. Some children cannot tolerate auditory and visual stimuli simultaneously and will cover either their eyes or their ears when viewing a film. This, of course, should be permitted.

Adaptations to the physical environment should be as subtle as possible, made without labeling or fanfare. The child may prefer neglect to being signaled out for special treatment. Many of the needs of exceptional children can be achieved at no additional cost. For example, library tables without skirts are not necessarily more expensive than those having them. Some of the critical needs of these children are elements long sought but never justified to the administrators' satisfaction. Carpeting for these children is not a luxury. It cushions the physically handicapped child's fall, facilitates the movement of wheelchairs and crutches, reduces distracting noises for those with partial hearing, diminishes the institutional look and provides a more home-like, relaxed atmosphere, critical to the functioning of the emotionally disturbed child.

Bulletin boards and displays should be designed with the special child's deficits in mind. Large, multi-sensory projects are best. These should incorporate good figure/ground contrast for the perceptually disturbed and visually impaired. Lettering should be large, distinct and preferably three-dimensional. Information should be displayed tactually if possible. Communication always should outrank aesthetics.

The ambiance of the library is critical. As for all children, the message to the special child should be: "You are welcome here; we're glad you came." There are so many institutions and facilities in these childrens' lives that do not accommodate them. A child wearing many pounds of metal bracing is difficult to take to the grocery, the department store, the bank, the art museum, etc. Buildings with stairs and without ramps are inaccessible. A revolving door is a major barricade. As for the disturbed child, his behavior is not tolerated in public buildings and his life pattern may be such that he consistently encounters hostility and rejection. The library may be the first social agency to break this tragic pattern.

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